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NORTHERN ARCHITECTURAL ASSOCIATION.

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(ALLIED WITH THE R.I.B.A.)

INAUGURAL ADDRESS,

DELIVERED BY

THE PRESIDENT,

MR. FRANK WEST RICH, F.R.I.B.A.,

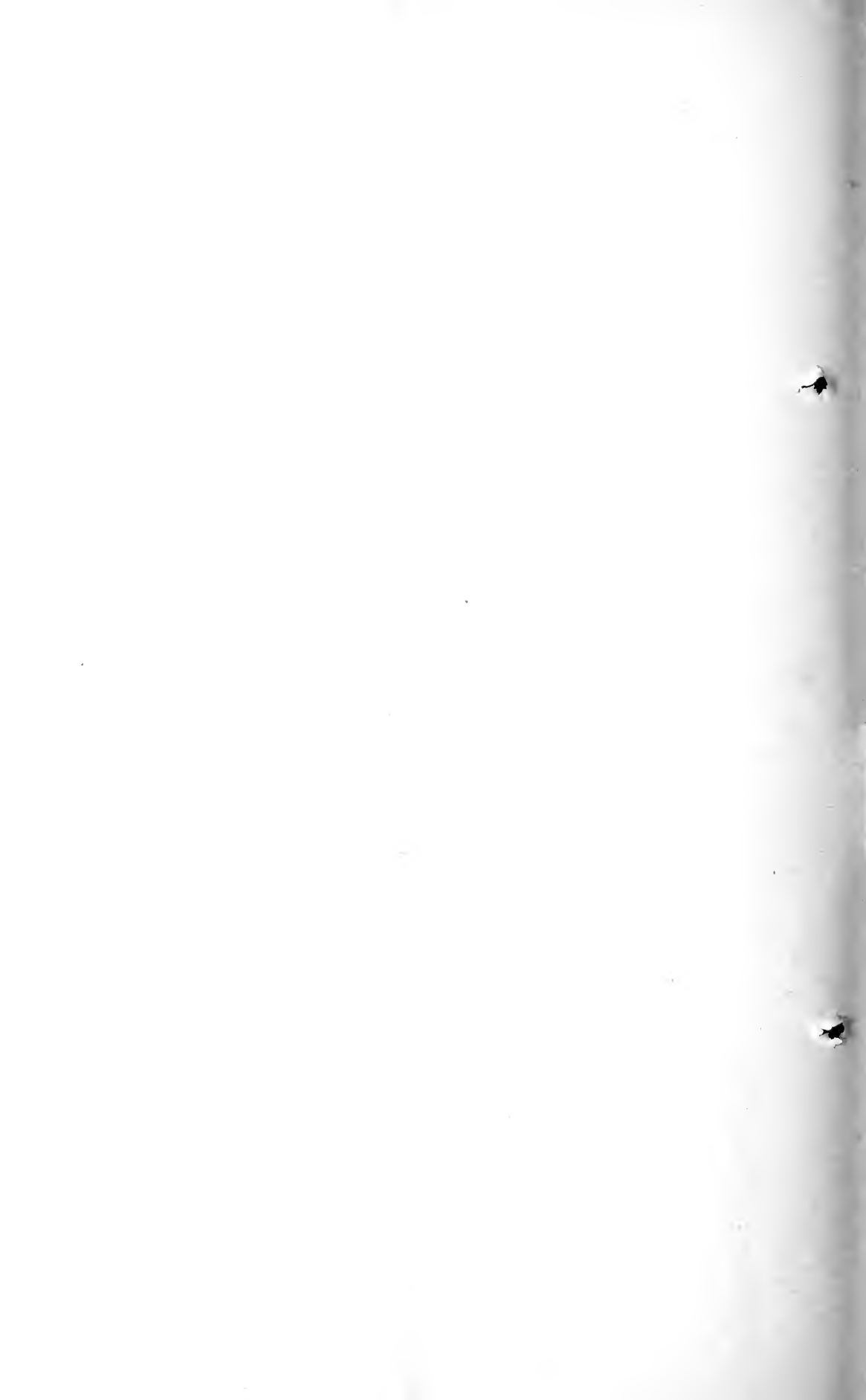
AT A GENERAL MEETING OF THE MEMBERS, HELD AT THE
MEETING ROOM, ART GALLERY, NEWCASTLE-UPON-TYNE,

16TH NOVEMBER, 1898.

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INAUGURAL ADDRESS.

MR. VICE-PRESIDENT AND GENTLEMEN,

I have the honour, of offering a few remarks, on the occasion of opening the Winter division of our Fortieth Session.

I may be allowed, in the first instance, to congratulate the Association on such a lengthy existence, and, in the next, on the continued firmness in the roll of Members, and the continued prosperity in the Treasury.

Since I last had the honour of addressing you (which seems but yesterday), there has appeared in one of our professional journals an illustrated article on the Architecture of this city. In my Address last year, I took the opportunity (it being the Diamond Jubilee year) to describe some of the buildings, and the progress of Architecture in Newcastle during Her Majesty's reign, and I then ventured to assert, that the Architecture of this city, was of as high a quality as will be found in any city in England (excluding, of course, London, which will compare with no place, or, rather, no place can compare with it.) It was with some feelings of satisfaction, after reading the criticisms in the journal before referred to, to find them so much in accord with my own.

I should like here to pay, on behalf of our present and past Members, a graceful tribute to the said journal for its fair and unbiassed criticisms on the Architecture of Newcastle. There was, however, one part in this criticism which was not very palatable, that referring to the Domestic Architecture. I think we must admit it, with some exceptions. There is, however, one consolation, that it is possibly as good as that in many other cities.

It is astonishing what a very small percentage of domestic buildings are the work of Architects; those of our friends who reside in detached residences, and who do employ Architects, are generally men of simple or quiet tastes, who allow little latitude or scope for design. They generally are possessed of a cherished ideal, a house after their own hearts, often one like a square box, with hipped roofs. This tendency on the part of some of our friends for this modest display is perhaps better so than the other way. It may be called a national characteristic. But however plain or simple our friends desire a house designed, or whatever cranks they may have in their heads either as to the plan or exterior effect, it is our duty as Architects to place before them the correct course to be followed, and, whether the house be simple or elaborate, the design should be right, and the plan a model of usefulness.

The journal says the Architects of Newcastle "must look to their laurels" in this respect. We have done fairly well in other walks of Architecture, but in this we are not up to the mark. We have the consolation, as I said before, of being perhaps as good as our neighbours, but that is not sufficient. The criticism may be a fair one, and the stigma must be wiped out.

The British public ever grumble at the cost of works, whether public or private ; but if any really fine design be placed before them they are quick to recognise its merits (except members of a Government, or, indeed, of any elective body), and rightly applaud its author, and will gladly face the extra cost rather than a poor design.

Our Students have done some work during the past Session, but one cannot help feeling that there is with *our* Students, as with those in nearly every other similar Association, a certain lack of enthusiasm. This is a matter to make us all think seriously whether the plan we follow is a good plan. The whole of our efforts in teaching our younger Students at present is voluntary, and however excellent in theory a voluntary system may be, yet there is no shutting our eyes to the fact that the results are not satisfactory, and the reason is not far to seek. The task of teaching should, and no doubt does, devolve upon the men of most experience, and of greatest merit ; but these men are generally those engaged in active practice, whose every moment is bespoken, rendering it impossible they can do any justice to voluntary teaching. It, after all, very much resolves itself into a money question, that is, the teachers of our students or demonstrators, or whatever we may term them, should be remunerated ; to make it worth their while, as in other professions, and the cost involved in this remuneration should be paid by the recipients of the knowledge, and what is more important, is the fact that the teachers should be Architects in active practice, the information must not be taught by professional crammers.

Architecture is a living art, and the practice of Architecture carries with it the implication that any person practising it must necessarily be quite to the front in all the endless wants and details of our busy lives, taking advantage of, and working into use, the innumerable facts that Science is for ever disclosing ; and last, but not least, to possess an enthusiastic and thorough knowledge of what we may safely call our "Old Masters" and their works—the men who laid down the foundation of our art, from that Egypt of which we have lately heard so much, down through all the centuries to our own time, building up, in stone and in literature, a colossal and a glorious art—one which it is incumbent on us to hand down unsullied, and bettered if we can, to future generations.

It is on considerations of this nature that the littleness of our teaching becomes apparent, and the need of a better system being inaugurated.

The system of pupilage (as in the apprenticeship system in the building trades) has undergone great changes in our lifetime. Our younger students have, however, all the greater need for information. It is a well known fact, that one man in every ten would not hesitate to attempt to teach Architecture, so much is it the custom of every man to consider Architecture an art with which he is quite conversant, and, therefore, attacks it gaily with a light heart. He lives in a house, or has business premises, and therefore knows all about it; but, take my word for it, there is no one who knows so much of Architecture as your Architect. He spends his life in the study and performance of it, he is in touch with the innumerable wants of the times, and conversant with the record of past centuries to which I have before alluded. It is to such men to whom I would hand over our younger students. The manner in which this is to be done is the crux of the whole subject. The voluntary system has been tried, and with no particular success. There then only remains the other system, accompanied by the financial consideration.

Our Council have given this matter some attention, and know that in this City there exists an institution, the Durham College of Science, where very many subjects of a technical nature, and in touch with Architecture, can be studied, and a scheme for amalgamation with the College on these subjects is at present under consideration by our Council.

But after the study and mastery of technical subjects, there remains that immense field of true Architecture, embracing the absolutely useful in everyday life, and the absolutely immeasurable field of imagination, or what is more generally termed the fine art of design, a quality beyond the range of examinations.

I think we may leave the matter for the present with our Council, who will safeguard our younger friends, and trust the scheme of amalgamation with the College, and also with the Institute, who, I believe, have a plan in embryo, to work in conjunction with allied Societies, not, possibly, so much in technical subjects as with the literature and history of Architecture, will have the effect of putting our Students upon a sound footing. But all this points distinctly to some greater scheme looming in the future, a future I imagine not far distant.

I should now like to refer to one or two subjects relating to our general practice.

I believe we all find, and every day accentuates the position, that the inspection of our works becomes more onerous, owing to circumstances we need not stop to examine here, and the employment of Clerks of Works has become a necessity to meet the varying changes of practice. But the admittance of a Clerk of the Works is not always a blessing, and frequently brings uncalled for responsibilities upon us, who have already many to bear.

The uprising of so many local and money-spending Authorities, who so frequently appoint their own clerks of the works, calls for some decided course of action from our side.

Men appointed in this way, are frequently so appointed on political or other questionable grounds, working very often antagonistic to the Architect, rendering his position well nigh untenable.

We all know, from long experience, that our best-designed schemes may be absolutely wrecked in the performance by the carelessness or ignorance of an inspector. There is no need why any more responsibility should be put upon members of our profession by the faults of others. Therefore the clear course is apparent—that is, the Architect must appoint the Clerk of Works, as recommended by the Institute, selecting a man who, from his own knowledge, is fully qualified to carry out the work. I think it prudent that the Clerk of Works should, in the first instance, be paid by the Architect, who, in due course, is repaid by his client. I have never known a work suffer when worked on this system, but have known deplorable results follow the other course.

It will, I have no doubt, be well within the knowledge of Members, of the increasing vigilance of the City Engineer in respect of the deposit of plans, and the carrying out of buildings. There can be no fault lying with the City Engineer in his efforts to obtain accuracy; it is a quality much wanted, but it, like many other things, all go to make work more costly. Where we do really find a fault, is in the Town Improvement Committee taking such an extended time in approving or disapproving plans. I wish here to make a strong protest, on behalf, not only of our Members, but of the public generally, against the long interval of time that is lost in the Committee meeting for the consideration of plans, at intervals of fourteen days, causing, in many cases, considerable financial loss to owners of property, and would respectfully ask the Town Improvement Committee to fall in more with the wants of the times, and place their meetings at lesser intervals.

I remember, some years ago, when I happened to act as your Secretary, the same question arose, and information was obtained from all the chief Cities of England and Scotland, as to the usual practice in these matters, when it transpired that, in many of the larger Cities, there were much quicker facilities, in dealing with deposited plans, than what obtains in Newcastle. This was communicated to our Town Improvement Committee, but no good resulted. Let us hope they will no longer stand in the way of public business, but take a more enlightened view of the situation. There is not time, in the present rush of business, to wait a fortnight for a decision as to whether a plan is approved, or it is not approved. The public want their work done quickly, and in some instances, where alterations occur in the progress of building, to wait a fort-

night, frequently means laying in the work altogether for that period, to the manifest loss of the owner.

There is a general feeling that we are becoming very much over-governed in Municipal matters. Powers are now being sought which will still further interfere with the liberty of the public in building, the strangest part of it being that the public have never asked particularly to have their liberty curtailed in this way ; but there is no doubt nine-tenths of these new powers are fads emanating from the mind of some of our City Councillors, and generally for notoriety or elective purposes. This may be plain language, but, speaking for Architecture, we shall find, presently, serious obstacles placed in the way of free design, and the Architecture of our streets reduced, by these Bye-Laws, to a "ditch water" level. It goes without saying, that the picturesque quality of our streets depends entirely on diversity in design, upon one building differing from the other in height, width, disposition of eaves or gables, projections or recesses, or the like. Some there may be found who advocate a design in street Architecture of the "Gower Street" type, but let us hope they are few, or, to fly at higher game, some of the streets of Paris, of the Baron Haussmann period, which, although more grandiose than the former, are equally unsatisfactory in their final effect.

The quality of street Architecture marks down the history of the times, and records the sentiments of the people. We all know the circumstances under which the HAUSSMANN buildings were erected, and we all know scores of Cities where other circumstances existed, where a free people have given free scope to their qualities in design, imprinting upon their buildings a strong individuality, rendering their cities interesting in every turn we take. I am the last man in the world who would advocate the abolition of bye-laws for the regulation of some building matters ; let these matters be confined to health measures and the like, but let us have liberty in design. One is tempted into making these remarks by a suggestion emanating lately from our Town Improvement Committee, and there is the draft for a further bill now lying at the Town Hall, which should have the careful attention of every citizen.

While on building matters, we may say a word or two on a special kind of building very much talked of now-a-days, and much needed, one popularly called a "Fireproof" building ; but, as a fireproof building has never yet been built, it is more correct to say a "fire-resisting" building, precisely in the same way as iron or steel safes have changed their names of late. I do not purpose here reading an essay on fire-resisting buildings, but merely to call attention to their increasing importance. This is a class of building needing all the skill of skilful men to devise, needing all our powers of observation and investigation to enable us to keep in touch with the times, it is what may be called the "Modern Building." Business, as we all

know, moves quicker year by year, and the hazards increase. To have a large and valuable building filled with equally valuable stock burned down about our heads, is too serious an interference with business to be lightly endured.

There is often too much theory in the design of fire-resisting buildings. Fire is a terrible master, but, in it, Dame Nature will have her way ; it is, therefore, no use romancing in matters of construction. It is now pretty well agreed that all important or business premises, especially those abutting on public thoroughfares, should be reasonably fire resisting, yet we frequently find them supported on the ground floor entirely on cast-iron columns or steel stanchions. The effect of this, in the event of a fire, is for the whole building to collapse like a pack of cards.

It may be said Architects are to blame for this, but it is not so. From what I know of Architects, I do not think there is one who, in designing a building would, on his own intuitive knowledge of design, ever produce a building standing apparently on plate glass.

This iron and plate glass is one of the signs of the times, one of the phases in the history of Architecture of the nineteenth century. The busy City man, in his instructions to his Architect, insists on having "All Window," and he has to have it. Therefore, that material, which will bear the greatest load on the smallest section, must be used for supports, and, for the rest, glass, for which there is no substitute. But, unfortunately, both these substances are not safe under fire. Here, however, is where the skill of the Architect must come in, and here we must rely on our actual experience in fires, noting the effect on building materials, and on well conducted and authentic experiments. I think further that, at this time, it is peculiarly opportune to refer to fire-resisting buildings, for our methods of construction are altering every day, and, if they are so altering, they may as well alter in the direction of safety. Science has yet a big field before it, there are already many materials in the market of which we can take advantage in constructing fire-resisting buildings, but more efficacious ones are needed,

Every one who has noted the great change that has come over building material during the last 25 years, and of the wants of the general public, cannot, I believe, help coming to the conclusion, that sooner or later some of our well-known and much used materials, such for instance, as wood, and common lime plastering, will become more scarce, and may, to a great extent, drop out altogether. Already other materials are taking their place.

Wood has two great faults (though I am bound to say it has many virtues), it is highly inflammable, and it is highly susceptible to wet and heat ; schemes have been tried with a view to render wood less inflammable, but before we can consider our buildings fire-resisting, much more must be done in that direction, that is to say, if wood is used.

I alluded earlier in this address to the "rush of business," and it is here where wood fails us. Our clients will not wait, they must have their buildings finished quickly, and expect them to be quite dry in no time, forgetting that the materials of which they are built, are largely mixed with water. If we were, like the Shipbuilders, to rivet iron plates together, and there you are, finished, and as dry as ever it will be, but we have not quite come to that yet. The wood fittings are fixed while the building is reeking with moisture, and when, having had time to imbibe a quantity of this moisture, which expands the fibres of the wood, the heating apparatus is then lighted up, and the wood work shrinks often to a wreck.

It is quite clear that under these circumstances neither of these materials (wood and lime plaster) meet the demands of ordinary practice. Wood on account of its inflammable nature and instability, and lime plaster on account of its wetness and slow setting. There are, as we know, many excellent quick setting plasters in the market, but then we frequently lay this on to wooden laths, which in their turn are upheld by wooden stoothings. In case of a conflagration all this ends in disastrous results. Indeed, we may go further and say a great many of the usual modes of construction are wrong, for do we not embed floor, roof, and other timbers in the walls where they rot, and do we not form cavities between floors and ceilings, hollow partitions, skirtings, etc., which form excellent channels for fire. Much of this can be avoided by using a more solid form of construction, but this means more cost; it is the difference between good work and jerry work. The public, after all, have it very much in their own hands to decide. I think all buildings should be built reasonably fire-resisting, especially public buildings, business premises, and country mansions. There seems to have never been a public building so reasonably fire-resisting as the Colosseum of old Rome, and although such a building is unlikely to be built in this age, yet its lessons should not be lost upon us. A building of to-day would be more composite in its materials, but, take my word for it, simplicity in materials, as in details, is often the secret of good design. It is distressing in the extreme to hear of public buildings being destroyed by fire, probably carrying with it some loss of human life; of immense places of business reduced to a heap of ashes, dislocating trade, and throwing scores of people out of work at a moment's notice; of some old ancestral mansion engulfed in the same fury, destroying in its irresistible force, not only the building, but, at the same time, priceless works of art that are lost for ever.

It is time, therefore, that more attention was given to fire-resisting buildings, even in a small way, and if wood is still to be used, it must be rendered entirely non inflammable, and which must not much increase its market value or render it unworkable on the bench; or, if wood cannot be so treated, then some other material is wanted to fill up the missing link. Some material that will be easily worked

into all the varied uses to which we now put wood, such as our doors, windows, staircases, and innumerable other things. It must not only be non-inflammable, but must be of such a nature as will admit of its being worked into all the uses I have indicated, and also to be adaptable to all the alterations that occur in ordinary life, such as the alteration of buildings, or even the alteration of a door, or a window, or making a new way through a partition, etc. Wood lends itself easily to all these alterations. It is owing to this very word "alterations" that so many schemes now in the market for fire resisting purposes fail; but that fatal word "alterations" must be reckoned with, for although the quality of being fire-resisting is a most important question, yet it must go hand in hand with ordinary usefulness, for buildings change owners, and often uses, and alterations become inevitable.

The new material, if indeed we are to have one, must have a further quality, beyond being fire-resisting; it must be proof against all influences, as to wetness or dryness, it must not shrink when the fires are lighted, or swell in a damp building, for as I have said before, men will not wait now-a-days for natural materials to season.

How different all this is from the time in which they took to erect the mansions of the time of Elizabeth or James, Burghley, Montacute, Crewe, Audley End, Burton Agnes, and many others, in which twenty years were frequently spent in the erection and completion of these houses; but then, look at the glorious results!

If wood ever ceases to be one of our prime materials in building construction, it will be with a great twinge of regret that we shall part company with it, for has it not been associated with us since time was? Have we not fashioned our dear old British Oak into all the uses of our lives? Do we not look with pardonable pride on its sympathetic grain, as it encases our cosy panelled rooms, and think of its great traditions, immutably bound up with some of the most glorious events in our National History. I do believe, fire-resisting considerations notwithstanding, that the Oak will never leave us.

There is another circumstance in our practice I must refer to. I allude to the testing of materials. The scope of this subject is endless as all experimenters know. It is too vast a subject to be undertaken by a private individual, and no Government will undertake it. We have not the advantages that our friends, the Civil Engineers, possess, in frequently having the wealth of a huge company behind their backs to conduct experiments without limit. No, our works are not of such a colossal size as our friends', and will not justify such an expenditure. How then can this thorough, far reaching, and absolutely authentic series of experiments be carried into execution.

There are, and have been, men who have devoted much expense and time to these matters, and to whom we are much indebted, but the information is frequently fragmentary, and not easy to reach.

There have been no thorough series of experiments for Architects, on materials in purely Architectural construction. The Institute have very lately carried out some experiments as to the strength of brickwork, &c., which are most valuable; but I do not think the expense of the system I am now foreshadowing should fall on only a part of the members of our profession—I think a much greater grasp should be taken of the situation. All our building materials, as used in the ordinary building manner, should be subjected to exhaustive tests of every kind, not only with regard to strength or endurance, but also to that “fire resistance” to which I have before alluded. I do not mean that every piece of brick, stone, concrete, wood, or iron should be tested, but sufficient experiments be carried out to establish a reliable data. All this would be a matter of hard facts. There would be no question of design or other debatable ground, to interfere with the steady carrying out of this scheme. After we are in possession of the mass of facts, such a scheme would bring out, we could, from the knowledge then acquired, design accordingly.

And who can tell what school of design or style of Architecture this would produce? But, as I said before, all this will cost money, and it will be a continuing expenditure. I am not going to say who is going to move first in this matter, or to say how it is to be brought about. I shall leave that to the collective wisdom of the members of our profession. All I would suggest is that, in such a scheme, the control should be in the hands of the Institute, and all members of the profession, whether members of the Institute or not, all members worth the name, should contribute in annual subscriptions in such a sum as to make it worth while for the best men giving us the benefit of their services.

I should like, before I sit down, and as there are no reporters present, to say a few words on Architectural practice, and with your permission, to offer a few words of advice. I may have again to use plain language, but, I think, I can rely on your forgiveness. I intend these remarks only for those of our friends in practice.

It is, of course, delightful to speak of Architecture as an Art, and of all the glorious traditions belonging to it, when the imagination is floated on ethereal waves of the poetry of art. But no such angelic existence is vouchsafed to us. The hard fact remains, that we must descend to the ordinary things of life. We have our living to make. We are not like the chameleon, who was said to live on the air. We have to earn our bread and butter like the rest of ordinary mortals.

We all know that the practice of Architecture is about the most ill-paid of all the polite professions. I think we should all do something to remedy this state of things. There are several ways by which this could be accomplished, but all must tend to the same end. We are not blind to the signs of the times. We cannot have failed to observe that nearly all the great captains of industry have lately placed their

backs to the wall, and the tendency of the age is all that way. Our friends of the legal and medical professions have had their backs to the wall for a long period, and take care they keep there. But we are yet too much disjointed—too wide apart in our charges. Ugly rumours reach us now and then of Architects working for half the acknowledged fee, and other shady performances. If there be any truth in these rumours, I should like to advise our “Brothers in Art” to be firm, and toe the line, for, depend upon it, cheap services merit their own reward. The public will always place most reliance on services of most value.

We are sometimes confronted in our practice with a disaster that may entail investigation in the courts, and we may be called to support, or contest, by evidence, the matter in question. Our only straight and open course is to maintain truth and justice, and, if matters terminated there, all would be well. But all who, in any way, have perused the proceedings, or attended the enquiries in the courts, cannot have failed to be struck by the direct conflict of evidence. It is here the professional witness flourishes, and it is here we hear the scathing criticisms of the judges denouncing Architects as men beneath contempt. May I again plead that Architects stand together, not to burk the truth, but to help it? Not to “extenuate or set down aught in malice,” or the dire day may come when they themselves are in the same boat, and need their professional brethren’s advice.

There is yet another matter to which I should like to say a word, I allude to the question of Status. This is a matter concerning only the ways of the world, but a very important matter to us. We have heard of the judges’ opinion of us in the courts, and we know too well the opinion the public form of the profession. Looking to the immense field covered by the profession of Architecture, the important results upon our existence as an educated people, and the life-long study to master it. Is it right, I say, that such an important profession should be belied and in such disrespect? I believe the members have it entirely in their own hands. I have already indicated some lines that would lead to a different state of things. Members will easily perceive others that will lead still further on. The men who employ us are generally wealthier men than we are. Respectability is a potent factor, and, I think I would say, be a gentleman first and an Architect afterwards. Let us have no more such definitions as the man, when he said: “An Architect is that man who rides first-class at other people’s expense, and third at his own.” These may be all small matters, but “trifles make perfection, but perfection is no trifle.

Let us better our financial position if we can. Let us stand together, be the guardians of fairplay and truth, and let our integrity be as firm as the everlasting hills. Then, we may establish ourselves firmly in the confidence of our employers, a consummation we much deserve. But let all this be done as by an unwritten law,